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SUBJECT: ETA VIOLENCE AMID RUMORS OF IMPENDING TRUCE

¶1. ETA carried out its second series of bombings in the last two days with two attacks the morning of of March 9, the latest in a string of 14 ETA attacks since the beginning of the year. The attacks, one along a highway in the Cantabria Region in the north of Spain near the Basque Region and a second along another roadway, were timed to draw attention to a "general strike" in the Basque Region called by ETA front-group Batasuna to protest the recent deaths of ETA members in Spanish prisons (one by apparent suicide, the second from natural causes). Basque nationalist extremists also organized roadblocks and burned tires in their stronghold towns in Guipuzcoa Province, engaged in acts of vandalism, and called for rallies in Bilbao, San Sebastian, and the Regional capital of Vitoria. This is the first strike called by Basque nationalist groups in nearly four years and the first since April 2001 organized for explicitly political reasons. Interior Minister Juan Jose Alonso termed the strike "illegal" and vowed to maintain a climate of normalcy in the region. It appears that few people joined the strike, with the Basque government reporting that less than 5 percent of the workforce took part and other observers reporting generally routine activity.

//ETA POSTURING BEFORE PEACE TALKS?//

¶2. Since the beginning of the year, the Zapatero government has devoted increased attention to the situation in the Basque Region, with an eye to initiating a viable peace process. Zapatero views ETA's current weakness as providing a historic opportunity to end the conflict and has declared a willingness to engage the terrorist group, if it renounces the armed struggle. ETA has not made the government's job easy; rumors of an impending ETA announcement of a truce have competed with weekly news of ETA bombings, street violence, and increased extortion from Basque businesses (the so-called "revolutionary tax"). Some observers speculate that ETA is making a show of force before announcing a truce, noting that ETA has not carried out a deadly attack in more than two years. However, the opposition Popular Party (PP) has joined victims of terrorism organizations in roundly attacking the government's disposition to negotiate with ETA, pointing to ETA's use of previous negotiations and truces to reorganize and rearm itself. The Association of Victims of Terrorism (AVT) and the PP organized a mass demonstration in Madrid on February 26 to protest rumors that the government was considering liberating or providing other benefits some ETA prisoners as a sign of goodwill.

¶3. Still, rumors of a possible truce continue to swirl, focusing on Easter Week as the most likely opportunity. More recently, Spanish media have suggested an ETA announcement could come during March. It would be the fourth significant ETA truce since 1988. High level Socialist and moderate Basque nationalist leaders have hinted approvingly at the existence of ongoing ETA-government talks, probably in a third country. Radical Basque labor leader Diez Usabiaga, believed to be close to ETA, indicated that such discussions are underway. The PP has lambasted the Zapatero government

for allegedly conducting talks while ETA continues to carry out bombings. The PP has also criticized indications that the Zapatero government might be willing to relocate ETA prisoners closer to their families in the Basque Region, as part of the negotiations. The government has flatly denied having any official contacts or negotiations with ETA, but has also fired back by noting that the Aznar administration conducted talks with ETA during the 1998-1999 truce that ETA ultimately abrogated.

//LITTLE HOPE FOR A QUICK DEAL//

14. It appears that the Zapatero government hopes to engage ETA and convince the group to essentially abandon the armed struggle and cede control to its political wing. But despite ETA's failure to achieve any of its military or political objectives and its weakening by coordinated Spanish-French police action, the organization has managed to remain a relevant force. More importantly, ETA has not been repudiated by the 150,000-strong core of the radical Basque nationalist movement. Under these circumstances, ETA would reportedly stick to its demand of self-determination for the Basque Region, a political non-starter for Zapatero in light of strong public sentiment against granting concessions to ETA. The terrorist group would also likely press for amnesty for ETA members and supporters, another emotionally-charged issue difficult for any Spanish government to confront.

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